Learner Autonomy and Cooperative Learning

By Mary Jo Rendon

"Autonomous learning" and "cooperative learning" are terms that recur over and over in recent TEFL literature. Teachers who view language learning as an individualized process encourage their learners to be autonomous. Others go a step further and expose their students to cooperative learning in the classroom.

In a paper entitled "The Ethnography of Autonomy," Philip Riley (1988) refers to the importance of group creation, group discovery, group negotiation, and group sharing. This idea of group interaction establishes an valuable framework in which individual learning processes can develop. Moreover, the sharing of learning processes in teams not only strengthens the language skills that students are to learn, it also exposes them to important social skills.

Along similar lines, Michael Legutke's discussion of experiential learning (1991) touches upon the culture of the foreign language classroom and emphasizes self-direction within group learning. Legutke's holistic view of language learning encourages learners to bring their own experiences to the classroom, and in doing so to take control of their own learning. The teacher's role in the classroom then shifts from the classical teacher/textbook model to the more innovative language/facilitator model. In this situation, the teacher sets tasks around the learners' experiences, conducts continuous evaluations of learners to guide them in the learning process; and develops an acceptable criteria of performance for the collective whole.

The studies by Riley and Legutke provide a general framework for designing courses for professionals. When designing these programs, I try to establish course objectives around professional needs and experiences, hoping to achieve a cooperative language setting similar to what they describe. Their idea of autonomous and cooperative learning-whether it be through a group project or learning tasks-can be accomplished through an exchange of ideas and perspectives that makes the learning experience relevant and meaningful to the participants.

While this is my personal objective when designing a course for professionals, there are a number of conflicts that arise, which I am sure are familiar other course designers. This paper will address these conflicts and discuss an approach for creating a language setting that leads to cooperative, autonomous learning.

Potential Conflicts

At the beginning of every quarter when a client company approaches our department for a Business English course, I am faced with four conflicts of interest. The first conflict resides in the demands made by the company. In this case, the company requests a special course for its

employees. The company imposes not only the time, length and content of the course, but also its level of participation and attendance. The company sets the parameters in which a teacher will have to teach a number of linguistic skills within a time period, but the students may have low motivation because they do not consider English as crucial for their professional development. This is the cause for conflict in meeting some of the objectives stipulated by the company at the beginning of the course.

A second conflict lies in the fact that company goals may differ from the employee's. Unknown to the company, some learners have set themselves different objectives in order to move up the company ladder or even out of the company all together.

A third conflict lies in the degree of difference between the supposed and the actual language level of the learner. While the client company may perceive its employees to be at a certain proficiency level, it is common to find that the employees themselves have a different perception. Both the company and the employees may be dismayed by the results of a language placement test if either envisioned the students as capable of acquiring the language skills for immediate use.

The final conflict that I have noted is one imposed by teachers. In our attempts to make learners more responsible for their learning, we do not take them by the hand through grammar exercises and verb tenses. We work towards creating a collaborative and interdependent setting in the classroom. However, due to cultural and/or personality factors, confusion may result as there simply may be some language learners who do not care to be independent or to learn with/from other classmates. Such students are very successful in the traditional language setting, where the teacher leads activities, and students respond to controlled tasks; they do not want any changes. Language learners fit different profiles depending on their age, socio-cultural, ethnic, or linguistic background, as well as their level of education. And the interstice between dependent and independent language learners should be recognized and respected by the teacher. Students should be able to choose whether they want to direct their own learning or be directed by others.

This paper is for the teacher whose students are interested in independent, autonomous language learning; and it addresses the teacher who wants to instill the notion of learner autonomy in his/her students.

These four conflicts, together or individually, can create a stressful situation for the course designer, the language center, the students, and the teachers. How can classes be conducted where different objectives can be realized without the company canceling the contract, students skipping class, and the teachers losing self-esteem?

The Compromise

A compromise has to be made. Language centers cannot afford to lose company clients; and teachers, as professionals, will make every effort to meet the learner's objectives as well as their own. One possibility resides in the use of commercially produced textbooks. The problem with this approach, however, is that the materials are all too often designed from a teacher-centered

model and are not really tailored to meet the specific needs of the company. The teachers are then faced with having to modify the material.

Another possible approach when providing in-company classes is that of photocopying fragments of material from a wide variety of existing textbooks. This approach may suit the needs of the group but it may go against international copyright laws!

In all company classes, teachers are working with professionals who are aware of what options are available for professional development. In the language classroom, a decision-making process should be nurtured and developed. In fact, the learning process should be considered as a management process. Anita Wenden (1987) describes this process as a series of decisions taken by both teacher and student, with continuous planning and monitoring of language activities. In such an environment, learners are active managers of their own learning, and the teacher becomes a counselor who creates an environment to promote autonomous learning.

Autonomous learners want to direct their own language learning. They want to know how to find learning resources, how to identify their learning strategies, and how to evaluate the development of their own language skills. In our professional programs, we have the learners identify their linguistic needs in a needs analysis; and we use this information to construct the course. One way we feel that we can promote autonomous learning in the language setting is to provide the learners with a *course objectives list, lesson outlines,* and *self-evaluation reports.*

Course Objectives

Course objectives are listed on the outline that all learners receive. If the course involves a class project or a series of small tasks leading toward a final project, this would be described along with the type of evaluation to be used. (See Model A.) (see Figure 1 below)

The idea behind handing the students a course outline at the beginning of the term is to allow them to make key decisions on what they want to study and when and how they want to learn it. Stevick (1990) suggests that most adult learners are striving towards autonomy, and this same desire manifests itself in the language classroom.

Lesson Outlines

Students benefit from an outline of each lesson that informs them about the language skills to be used for the different tasks in that lesson. (See Model B.) Unlike the course objectives list, the lesson outline would highlight the four language skills, classroom tasks, and materials used within that time period. (see Figure 2 below)

Such information helps learners identify what linguistic skills they should be using to accomplish specific activities. They need to know what skills are used and for what purpose. They also should identify those skills that need closer monitoring to ensure better production. This

encourages self-assessment and exposes students to metacognitive concerns. An example of an evaluation form is shown in Model C. (see Figure 3 below)

Towards Cooperative Learning

In general, in-company classes tend to have fewer students than general English classes. Such small groups of students allow teachers to set learning tasks based on interaction and interdependence among the students.

As in any language setting, the professional group of individuals forms a culture of its own. Social relations are structured and the form of production is defined. This creates a dynamic state of cooperation and builds an intimate setting for learning in the language classroom. Suddenly, the class textbook is overshadowed by other sources such as journals, newspaper articles, and professional experiences. The role of the teacher also shifts from the interpreter of institutional materials to a language facilitator.

One of the best ways to create a social, cooperative learning environment is for in-company classes that are at a low proficiency level to be project-oriented. Some projects that work well include creating a company, conducting a board meeting, giving a presentation, and holding a debate. Within each project, the teacher structures activities carefully so that there is a sense of positive interdependence among the members of the group. Mutual support and understanding of each person's role in completing the project is fundamental in cooperative learning. In face-to-face interactions, students are aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses, and they slowly build a support network within the class.

Conclusion

In order to give adult learners the chance to make choices and decisions in learning a new language, we must give them the opportunity to reason and reflect on their performance in the classroom. The concepts of autonomous learning and cooperative learning extends the adult learner's skills into linguistic areas where teachers are regarded more as language facilitators than textbook interpreters. The criteria that have been discussed in this paper can be summarized in the following points for teachers and course designers interested in fostering a communicative interactive learning setting:

1. *Flexibility:* Within a tightly structured syllabus, the course should allow students to have voice in determining the tasks they should be expected to perform. Moreover, students should be given the freedom to study at their own pace and rhythm.
2. *Project:* A series of small activities leading to a major classroom project fosters group sharing and negotiation and establishes a significant framework for individual learning.
3. *Course Objectives and Self-Assessment:* Business English classes need to inform learners what is expected of them and what they, in turn, can expect from the course.

Therefore, at the beginning of each course, learners should be informed of the objectives of the class. They should be aware of the value of the skills that the teacher wants them to learn, and they should be encouraged to take control of their own learning and discern their learning styles and needs.

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References

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Figure 1

Model A

Overall Course Objectives-

By the end of this 18-hour Professional English module, you will be able to perform the following linguistic skills within a business context:

• initiate, continue and end conversations;

• give short prepared presentations

• demonstrate control of register;

• use question intonation correctly;

• say numbers up to one billion;

• talk about present situation and future plans;

• use relative pronouns

Evaluation criteria-

During the course, your oral production will be evaluated against the following accuracy standard:

• use of conditionals

• use of superlatives

• use of future forms;

• use of a variety of tenses

Figure 2

Model B

 Lesson Outline-

Language Level:

Content Area:

Lesson Objectives:

Language skills: listening/speaking:

reading/writing:

grammar:

vocabulary:

Material needed/used:

Figure 3

Model C

Self-Evaluation—

Name:_____

Course:_____

Objectives:_____

1. What activities did I do in the class?

    ___listening ___watch a video

    ___information gap ___dictation

    ___simulation ___reading

    ___pronunciation ___discussion

    ___other

2. What do I think was the purpose of each activity?
3. What linguistic skills do I feel I used in each activity? (speaking, reading, writing, listening, working in pairs or individually). Can I define what strategies and skills I used to perform the classroom activities?
4. What have I learned from these activities?
5. Can these activities help me achieve my goals? If so, how? What activities could help?